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ABSTRACT

A survey of 27 principals, 45 kindergarten teachers, 86 primary teachers, and 57 preservice teachers was designed to determine whether teachers instruct kindergarten children and elementary school students differently. Subjects were asked about benefits of free exploration of materials, child-selected activities, use of props in play, social interaction, and the need for teacher-directed activities and commercial programs in teaching skills and concepts. Subjects responded to statements concerning the most effective ways to help children develop skills and concepts in speaking, listening, reading, writing, science, mathematics, and social studies. Findings indicated that: (1) principals and primary teachers believed that both kindergarten and primary children should spend most of their time in teacher-directed activities; (2) all groups supported the importance of play, choice, and interaction for all children; (3) kindergarten and preservice teachers were more play-oriented, with preservice teachers placing the most emphasis on play for kindergarten and primary children; and (4) all groups differentiated between kindergarten and primary grades by placing more emphasis on teacher-directed instruction in the primary grades. (RH)

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Saying is Not Believing: The Gap Between Theory and Practice in Early Childhood Classrooms

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in Early Childhood Classrooms

In visits to both kindergarten and primary classrooms, developmentally appropriate teaching is most often observed at the kindergarten level. In many kindergarten classrooms children are moving around the room, selecting activities that interest them, actively exploring materials and using props as they play, and constantly interacting with their classmates.

But this picture changes abruptly in the first and second grade classrooms. Here there is often one desk for one child and most children remain in their seats reading, filling in work sheets, or listening to the teacher. The children work; then, if there is time and the materials are available, they play. They are taught more directly by the teacher, who determines what is done and when it is done. In the primary grades, the approach to children and their learning appears radically different from the kindergarten. This is true even though early childhood theory and literature view ages five to eight as needing basically the same kind of experiences to learn.

Opinions About Instruction: What Practitioners Say

Is our perception accurate or are we misinterpreting what we see? Do teachers really teach five-year-olds

differently than they do six-year-olds? To find out we asked kindergarten and primary teachers, preservice teachers, and principals how they feel about appropriate instruction in kindergarten and the primary grades.

We developed a survey that addresses differing instructional strategies. We asked inservice teachers at both the kindergarten and primary level, preservice teachers, and elementary principals to respond to statements concerning the most effective ways to help children develop skills and concepts in speaking, listening, reading, writing, science, math, and social studies.

The questions were presented as a continuum. At one end of a continuum, the respondents were asked about the benefits of free exploration of materials, child-selected activities, use of props in play, and social interaction. These strategies were addressed because they represent practices that are developmentally appropriate for 5- to 8-year-olds (Bredekamp, 1987). It is through these activities that children become communicators, become thinkers, become problem solvers, become social beings, and learn concepts in all disciplines (Bredekamp, 1987; Carin & Sund, 1989; Fein & Rivkin, 1986; Frost & Klein, 1970; Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1987; Kamii, 1985; Rogers & Sawyers, 1988). At the other end of the continuum, respondents were asked about the need for teacher-directed activites and commercial programs in teaching skills and

concepts. These strategies were selected because these are the methods that we most often observed in primary classrooms. Sample statements from the survey which represent these methods and which address various areas of the curriculum are shown in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

A total of 215 educators responded to the survey: 27 principals, 86 primary teachers, 45 kindergarten teachers, and 57 preservice teachers.

From these responses we sought to learn three things:

1. Are there differences in the views of preservice teachers, kindergarten teachers, primary teachers, and principals as to the most effective approach to instruction in kindergarten and primary classrooms?
2. Do the groups view kindergarten instruction as significantly different from primary instruction?
3. Are any of the groups oriented more toward child-directed or teacher-directed instruction in achieving the goals of schooling in kindergarten and primary classrooms?

In answer to our first question, non-parametric analyses indicated that principals and primary teachers are the most traditional in their views of education. Both groups prefer a more teacher-directed approach in both kindergarten and primary classrooms. Of the two groups, principals most strongly favor a teacher-directed approach to instruction,

believing that this is the most effective way for children to learn basic skills and concepts.

Kindergarten teachers seem to have mixed opinions. They are more supportive of child-directed learning in the kindergarten but think primary children need more structure and more time spent in teacher-directed instruction. At the other end of the spectrum, preservice teachers think child-selected activities and free exploration are very important in both kindergarten and the primary grades. They feel that these methods are valid throughout the early childhood years.

Our survey confirms what we suspected. Primary teachers do indeed feel that to attain specific objectives children need to be taught concepts directly rather than through discovery. Children are being taught differently because teachers believe that the goals and objectives of the primary grades require a different approach.

The distinct differences in instruction that we observe between kindergarten and primary classrooms were also supported by the repsonses to the survey. All four groups surveyed view kindergarten and primary classrooms differently and all supported a more teacher-directed approach to teaching in the primary grades.

I Believe It, But...

Using the survey results, we tried to determine which of the four groups is more activity-oriented and which more teacher-directed in its beliefs. As mentioned before, principals prefer more teacher-directed activities in all early childhood classrooms while the preservice teachers prefer a more child-centered activity approach in both kindergarten and the primary grades. But, all groups, regardless of their support for direct instruction, believe that all children need the opportunity to select their own materials and be involved actively with materials and other people.

This result was puzzling. Although the respondents say it is important, the activity-centered approach is rarely observed in the primary grades and is even becoming rare in some kindergartens. So, if the respondents believe it, why don't we see it?

Our survey pointed to time as the critical element. In response to a question concerning the amount of time that ideally should be delegated to teacher- or child-directed activities, principals, primary teachers, and kindergarten teachers indicate that they would not set aside a significant amount of time each day for child-selected activities involving active manipulation of materials, use of props, and social interaction. Teacher-directed methods,

they believe, are most efficient in achieving goals and objectives and covering the great amount of content that must be covered. Then, if there is time, children can select activities on their own, talk to their friends, and play. Theory says that young children learn by messing with materials, talking, and acting upon objects. Primary teachers and principals say this is good for primary children, but it is not what primary classrooms are about.

Attitudes toward kindergarten are somewhat different. Kindergarten teachers and preservice teachers believe that kindergarteners need to spend the majority of their time in child-selected play, manipulation of materials, and interaction with their peers. Primary teachers and principals, however, feel the majority of the school day, even in kindergarten, should be teacher-directed with less time devoted to child-choice, play, and interaction. This finding helps explain the increasingly academic focus of many kindergartens as kindergarten teachers work to satisfy administrators and primary teachers.

So, it seems that what we see in classrooms is true. Kindergarten classrooms provide more choices, interaction, and active involvement for children because kindergarten teachers believe that this is important. Primary classrooms provide less time for child-selected activities, interaction, and movement because primary teachers feel that

the learning of needed skills and concepts requires direct teaching.

In summary, survey results indicated that:

1. Principals and primary teachers believe that both kindergarten and primary children should spend a majority of their time in teacher-directed activities. Of these two groups, principals are the most supportive of a direct teaching approach.
2. All groups support the importance of play, choice, and interaction for all children. Primary teachers and principals, however, do not choose to allocate significant amounts of time for these activities.
3. Kindergarten and pre-service teachers are more play-oriented and, of the two groups, pre-service teachers place the most emphasis on play for both kindergarten and primary children.
4. All groups make a distinction between kindergarten and primary grades by placing more emphasis on teacher-directed instruction in the primary grades than in kindergarten

Narrowing the Gap

As we thought about the results of our survey, it seemd that a place to begin to narrow the gap between theory and practice was to communicate with principals. We started here because literature suggests that the principal is the most influential person in determining the direction and priorities of a school (Ellis, 1986; Raydor & Body, 1975; Taylor, 1986) and because they are the least supportive of play, choice, and interaction as legitimate methods of achieving goals and objectives.

We decided to introduce local principals to what the early childhood literature is saying. None of our principals were members of early childhood organizations,

and we felt this would be an effective way to get the information to them. So as a part of a Membership Action Grant from NAEYC, we paid for NAEYC membership for 12 local principals encouraging them to attend local and regional meetings and to become involved with early childhood professionals. We also supplied a library of selected NAEYC publications which was sent to each school for several weeks. After one year, principals indicated that the most valuable resource provided was Young Children. We also know that many principals took advantage of the NAEYC publications while they were in their school. We do not know the influence of our activity on principals or schools, but we know that 12 principals now know about NAEYC and Young Children. Hopefully they will seek out these sources as they make decisions for their schools and as they support and assist teachers.

Some Thoughts for the Future

The theory-practice gap does exist. We do know how young children learn and the most effective ways to facilitate this learning. We also know that these methods are often not practiced. Our study helped us understand this gap and some reasons for its existence. We also have attempted to narrow the gap by exposing principals to early childhood literature.

Change takes time but it can come about. Some other strategies that we would suggest in stimulating change are to encourage teachers who are teaching in developmentally appropriate ways to continue these practices. We must encourage them to quietly spread the word by inviting visitors into their classrooms and by sharing the literature that supports their approach. In our consultation with school divisions and our work in classrooms, we have seen many teachers begin to change because another teacher who they trusted and admired was doing something in a certain way. Teachers who are practicing what the theory supports may be the best hope for increasing the incidence of appropriate practice in the primary grades and for preserving these practices in kindergartens. These teachers must also be encouraged to keep records of the learning that is occurring in their classrooms because ultimately the predominant practice will be determined by what results in the most learning.

Another approach to change is to encourage those with expertise in early childhood to pursue graduate work in administration. We need principals, assistant principals, supervisors, and other instructional leaders who know and understand early childhood education.

Change can occur. We can pursue ideas such as the ones suggested or search for new ways to spread the word. Whichever we choose, we must bring developmentally

appropriate practice to more of our children so that they can behave and learn like children.

Figure 1

Sample Survey Questions on Attitudes Toward Instruction

Use the following scale:
5--strongly agree; 4--agree; 3--no opinion
2--disagree; 1--strongly disagree

	Kindergarten	Primary
Teacher-directed activities are necessary to help children learn basic science, social studies, and math concepts.	5 4 3 2 1	5 4 3 2 1
Free exploration of materials is necessary for children to learn basic concepts in science, social studies, and math.	5 4 3 2 1	5 4 3 2 1
Using props and acting out roles in informal social interaction help children acquire many reading and writing skills.	5 4 3 2 1	5 4 3 2 1
Teacher-directed activities are necessary to help children learn basic speaking and listening skills.	5 4 3 2 1	5 4 3 2 1
Informal conversation and interaction with others are the most effective ways for children to acquire basic speaking and listening skills.	5 4 3 2 1	5 4 3 2 1

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